

Dolma visits the City



a Lama Mani book

Dolma Visits the City

As winter sets in the Indian city, the Tibetans from the refugee camps make their way in bearing sweaters of all colours and designs. Dolma watches her father go year after year to Bangalore and misses him terribly. One winter, her mother takes her along to spend the holidays there. Dolma wants to help too and there's something she can do very well - sing!

Written with the intent to introduce children to life in exile, this book takes the reader to the lanes adjoining the railway station in Bangalore, where the sweater sellers have their stalls.

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Note: While this story is set among real places and people, the protagonist and the situations he finds himself in are entirely fictional. Any resemblance to people, living or dead, is purely coincidental.

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Dolma Visits the City

Aravinda Anantharaman
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Lama Mani Books
a Think Tibet imprint

We dedicate this book to

Ama Jetsun Pema

*who works tirelessly to provide a future
for Tibetan children
in exile*



Dolma sits on the ledge in the verandah of her house waiting for her father. She sings a song while swinging her legs. It's one of Pa-la's favourite songs.

When she sees Pa-la walking up at the end of the lane, she runs to him.

'My vacation begins next week,' Dolma tells her father.

He's quiet.

Dolma knows why.

'Will you be here, Pa-la?' she asks him anyway.

'No, Dolma, I have to leave tomorrow.'

Every year, people living in the Phuntsokling refugee camp in Chandragiri, Orissa, head to cities like Vishakapatnam and Bangalore for the seasonal sweater selling; Dolma's Pa-la is one among them. The preparations begin early, in summer, when they go to Ludhiana, in North India, to buy sweaters in bulk. In June, they begin their journey southward. By October, only a few people remain in Phuntsokling. Dolma feels a lump in her throat as she watches her father pack.

'Study well, Dolma, and don't trouble your Ama-la too much' says Pa-la, smiling at her. The



lump in her throat seems to just get bigger. When he leaves for the bus station with his *milak*, Krishna, she watches mutely. Pa-la is going to Bangalore, a city she has only heard of. It will be many months before he'll be back. During this time, no one can coax a song out of Dolma. Sometimes she thinks that the songs just go away with Pa-la and return only with him.

Weeks go by and Dolma misses Pa-la every day. The camp is also desolate since many of the sweater sellers have taken their families along with them. In December, Dolma's school closes for the winter holidays. When she goes home after her last day of school, Ama-la has a surprise for her. They are both going to Bangalore to be with Pa-la!

'It will not be a holiday in the strictest sense,' Ama-la warns her. 'We have to help Pa-la.' But of course, Dolma doesn't mind working as long as she can be with her father.

It is the first time Dolma is leaving their home town and that too to visit such a big city. She clings tightly to Ama-la's *chuba* as they step out of the crowded railway platform.

'Where's Pa-la?' Dolma demands scanning the faces eagerly.

'He'll be at the stall. It's not far from here. You'll see him in a few minutes,' Ama-la replies.





They hurry towards the exit. Just outside the station is the pavement where the Tibetan sweater sellers have their stalls.

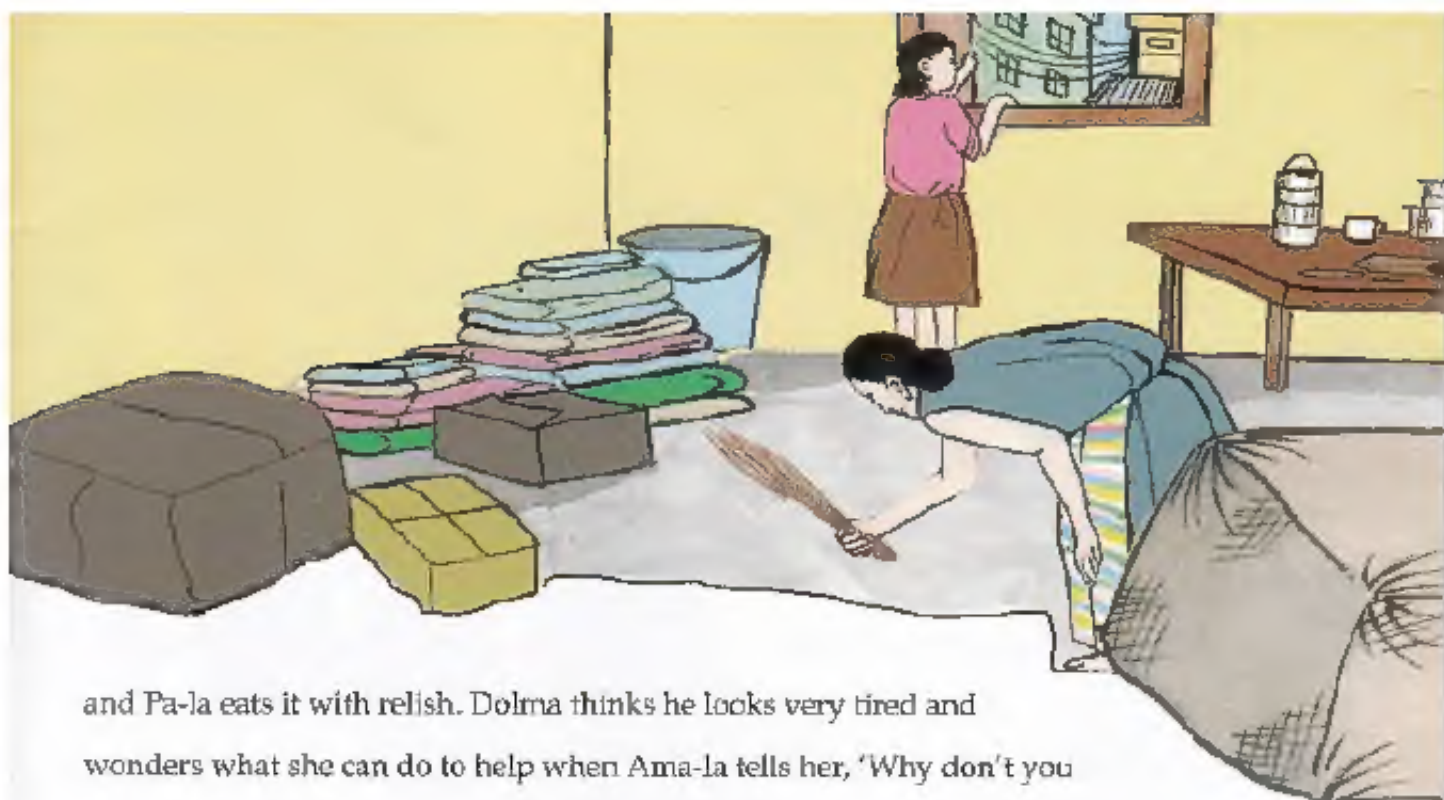
'Pa-lal' shouts Dolma spotting her father among the vendors. On his face is a tired frown. He is negotiating with a haggling customer when he hears Dolma's call. Instantly, his frown is transformed into a big smile. He quickly completes the sale, generously giving the customer an extra discount of ten rupees, and turns to his wife and daughter with happiness.

Ama-la wants to start helping immediately, but Pa-la insists that they rest for the day. 'Go to the room. I will see you at dinner,' says Pa-la, giving Ama-la the key. Dolma and her mother walk to the building where the sweater sellers have rented rooms for the season. Pa-la's lodging is on the third floor. It's a small room with an attached kitchen and bath. Ama-la takes one look around, picks up the broom and gets to work.

'Open the windows,' she tells Dolma as she starts sweeping.

Looking out of the window, Dolma sees buildings stuck to each other with no breathing space between them. She can see into other people's rooms. Across the narrow street is a similar row of tightly knit buildings, and hanging down from their balconies are long yards of brightly coloured saris. The street is chock-a-block with vehicles, all honking loudly and making an unpleasant cacophony. There is a lot of smoke, dust, and noise and Dolma feels very disoriented.

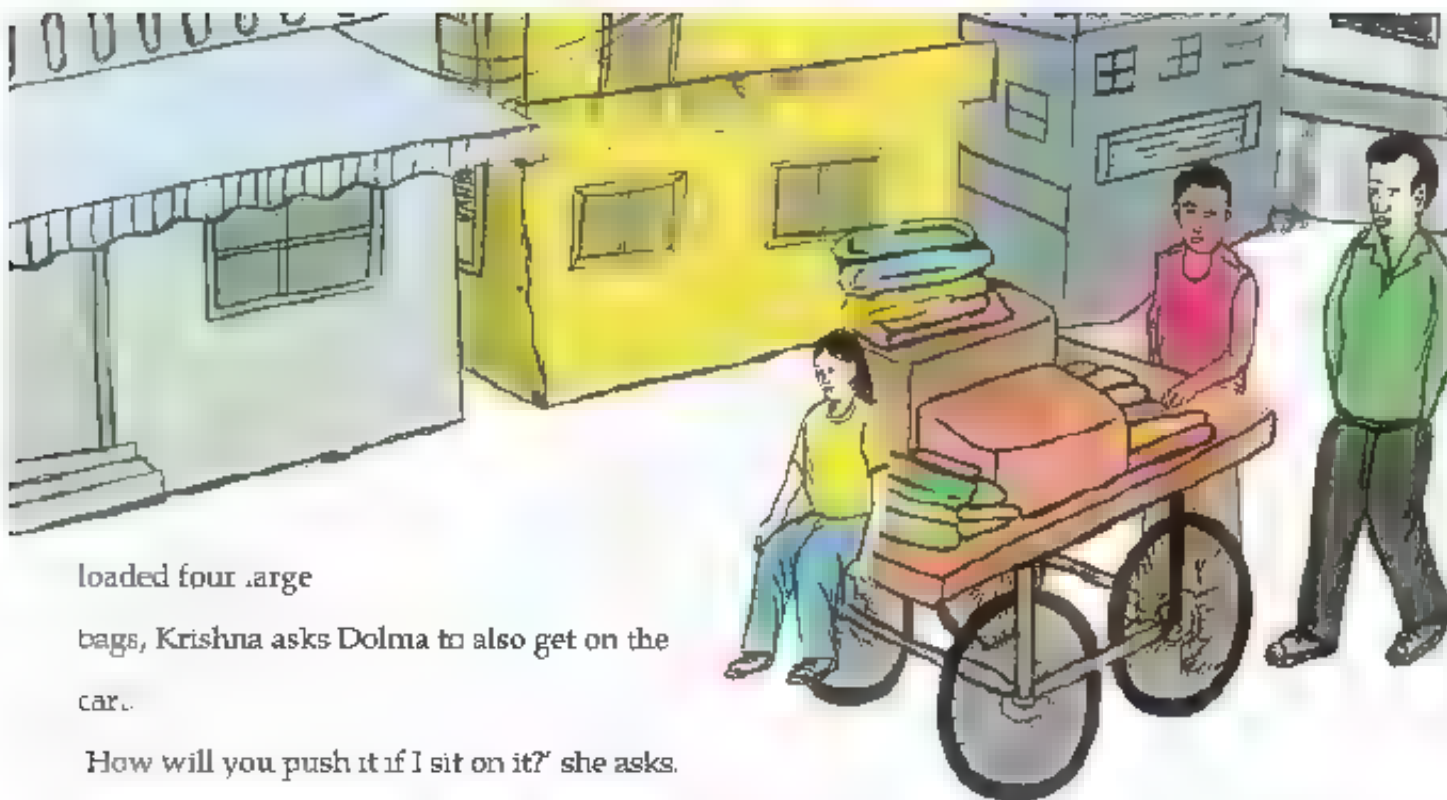
It's past nine in the evening when Pa-la returns home. Ama-la has cooked a dinner of *thukpa*



and Pa-la eats it with relish. Dolma thinks he looks very tired and wonders what she can do to help when Ama-la tells her, 'Why don't you sing something?'

Dolma clears her throat and sings, softly at first. She looks at Pa-la and it seems to her that the lines on his face smoothen out a little. Soon, she's singing aloud and feels happy despite being in the cramped room in an alien city.

By seven the next morning, Dolma is wide-awake, much to Pa-la's surprise. After a breakfast of leftover thukpa, she goes to work along with her parents. They walk through the lanes towards the storeroom, which the sweater sellers rent for the season to store the bags of sweaters. Krishna joins Pa-la in offloading the large bags onto the pushcart. After they have



loaded four large bags, Krishna asks Dolma to also get on the cart.

How will you push it if I sit on it?' she asks.

You are not even half the size of each bag, Dolma, he'll manage fine,' laughs Pa-la and hoists her on to the cart where Dolma sits amidst the large bags feeling warm and safe. They make their way through the crowded roads to the pavement where their stall is located. Some of the sweater sellers are already there, putting up their stalls. Krishna and Pa-la return to the storeroom twice to bring in the remaining bags while Ama-la starts opening them.

Dolma stares as Ama-la takes out the sweaters. They are in every imaginable colour and in so many designs. There are flowers embroidered in pastel shades, there is soft flannel that she cannot stop touching, tiny booties and bonnets, and the special jackets which, Ama-la says, are



very expensive.

When Dolma fingers the sweaters, Ama-la scolds her 'Don't dirty them Dolma. We have to sell them all. But sometimes when Ama-la is not looking, her fingers make their way almost automatically on to the soft fabric.

One by one the sweaters are taken out of their bags, to be hoisted up on to the displays. Everyone seems to know exactly what to do – the first two rows are for women's sweaters and cardigans, the third is for the men's and the top most row is for the jackets. The children's sweaters are displayed attractively in the front. The remaining bundles of sweaters are used to make a short wall on the three sides with space for one or two people to sit. It takes more than two hours to put up the stall and the day begins as soon as a passerby slows down to look at the beautiful sweaters. After the stall is up Dolma wanders off towards the other stalls. Most of the sweater sellers are from Phuntsokling and she knows them well.

Tashi Delek she says and they greet her in return. It's been months since they have left the camp and they bombard Dolma with questions. 'Is Choewang's stomach still troubling him?' 'Yes,' replies Dolma. They shake their heads. 'He should have it checked at the

Men-Isee Khang,' someone says. 'What about the grandpa whose daughter was supposed to visit from abroad?' Did she come?' someone else asks. 'Yes. And she bought Popo-la a hearing aid so that he can hear her when she telephones him.'

The others look pleased. It's the right thing to do, of course.



Dolma feels happy seeing familiar faces on the otherwise crowded Indian street. By lunchtime she's singing as she goes from stall to stall. There are no children to keep her company and it's only Zema the dog, who trots happily besides her.

The day ends long after the city lights have come on, when the crowds dwindle to one or two customers. Before they can leave, Pa-la and Krishna have to take the sweaters back to the storeroom. It takes a lot of time to pull down the display sweaters, fold them and pack them back in their bags.

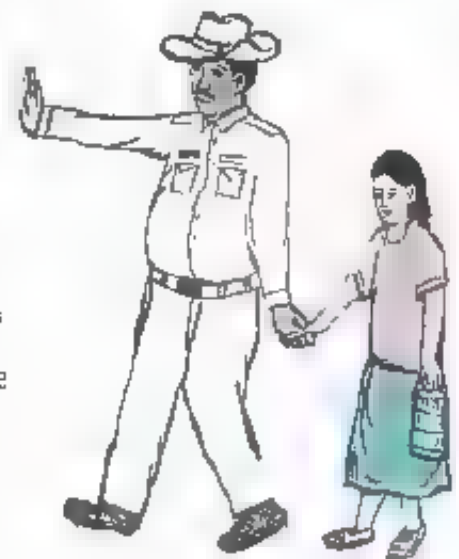
December is the busiest month of the year for the sweater sellers and there is no respite during the day. There are no Sundays or holidays either and everybody's working every day. In the morning, Ama-la and Dolma join Pa-la and Krishna to put up the stall before going home to clean and cook lunch. For a couple of days, Ama-la and Dolma carry lunch for Pa-la and Krishna. But on the third day, Dolma says,

'I'll go by myself, Ama-la.'

'Are you sure? The road is crowded and there is a lot of traffic.'

'I'll be careful,' she says, feeling quite grown up and responsible.

At the crossing however, Dolma is terrified. The vehicles rush past her in a maniacal hurry and when they cease on one side, it's only to come from the other direction. Dolma watches some of the Indians nimbly dart between the moving cars and two-wheelers



Will she also have to do that, she wonders. Luckily for her, the traffic policeman signals the vehicles to a stop and she runs across to the other side of the road.

'I came all by myself,' she tells Pa-la proudly, forgetting the fear she felt just some minutes ago.

Every year the group appoints a new President and this year, it's Pa-la who has been elected to that post. This means that he also has to make sure that the sweater sellers have no problems or complaints. Periodically, he meets the others who have their stalls in National Market or Shivaji Nagar, the other busy areas in Bangalore that have been allotted to the sweater sellers. While he's away, Ama-la takes charge and Dolma sits with her. She begins to think that Ama-la is better at bargaining than Pa-la.

When she sees a woman slow down before her stall, hesitating, Ama-la immediately invites her with a ready smile. 'You can come and look,' she says. 'There's no charge for that.'

It has worked nine out of ten times, Dolma thinks, as she watches the woman come up and finger the sweaters. Ama-la seems to know exactly what the customer wants when she selects a cardigan from the hanger. 'How much?' asks the woman who is now looking longingly at the pretty pink cardigan. '190' says Ama-la, smiling. She's prepared for the bargaining that will surely ensue.

'So much? For this sweater? Why, I can make it myself! I'll give you ninety,' the woman retorts.

Ama-la looks offended. 'This is a new design,' she says. 'Not a rupee less than 175.'

'One hundred.' '160.' They go back and forth before finally meeting at 150, the safe mid-way.



mark. It has been a satisfactory bargain and both Ama-la and the woman look pleased.

Sometimes a customer comes along, who doesn't know the fine art of bargaining. They ask for the price and instead of trying to bring it down, abuse the sweater sellers. When Dolma hears someone shout, '*Vapas jao apna desh*,' she is shocked. It's the only time she has seen Ama-la lose her usual cheer. It's a reminder that this is not home, not even if it's the only country some of them have seen. During the next few weeks, she hears such comments more than once and it saddens Dolma. She retreats into her parents' stall to the comforting pile of familiar sweaters. Sometimes, despite the noise and activity around her, she curls up and sleeps in the warmth of the sweater stall.

'Not everyone is bad, Dolma,' Pa-la explains when she asks him why people say such hurtful things. 'Look at the Lala now. He's a good man.'

A few days later, she sees for herself, for Lala is visiting from Ludhiana, as he does around Christmas. Dolma tags along with Pa-la to receive him at the station. They arrive at the stalls and the sweater sellers greet him with cheerful *Tashi Deleks*. A chair is brought for him, a cup of *chai* is placed in his hands and a box of sweets materialises as if out of nowhere and is passed around.

When the sweater sellers return to their stalls to continue with their business, Pa-la and Dolma stay back with him. Lala looks at Dolma.

'Your daughter, Dhondup?' he asks, pinching her cheeks affectionately.

'I've known your father since he was as little as you,' he tells her. 'He would come to Ludhiana with your Popo-la.'



Donna imagines her father as a young boy. She knows that he too had loved to sing when he was younger and wonders if he really wanted to be a sweater seller when he grew up. She knows that she doesn't.

Business has been good, Lala, Pa-la is saying. 'We should be able to repay most of your loan.'

'I am happy that you're all doing well,' Lala replies.

Pa-la borrows a motorbike and takes Lala to meet the sweater sellers who have taken loans from him. 'You can pay me the balance when you come to Ludhuana in May,' he tells them before he leaves.

Pa-la smiles at Dolma as they watch Lala leave. His expression says, didn't I tell you?

Finally it's January. The work reduces slightly. Pa-la finds time to take Dolma to the market. She especially likes to look at the bangles and other trinkets that Indian girls wear. Pa-la also buys her a small radio, and she spends many hours listening to the songs that play on it.

One afternoon, as she is singing to herself, her neighbour, an old Tibetan woman, calls out, 'What's that song you are singing?'

'I heard it on the radio,' Dolma replies.

'Don't you know any Tibetan songs?'

'I know the ones I learned at school.'

'Do you know any, Momo a?' she asks walking over to where the old woman is sitting with



her prayer wheel Momo-la laughs and after a brief pause, begins singing.

lu ala lamo ala len

lu thala lamo thala len...

What is this song, Momo-la?

It's an old Tibetan song that my Momo-la used to sing when I was as young as you.

lu ala lamo ala len

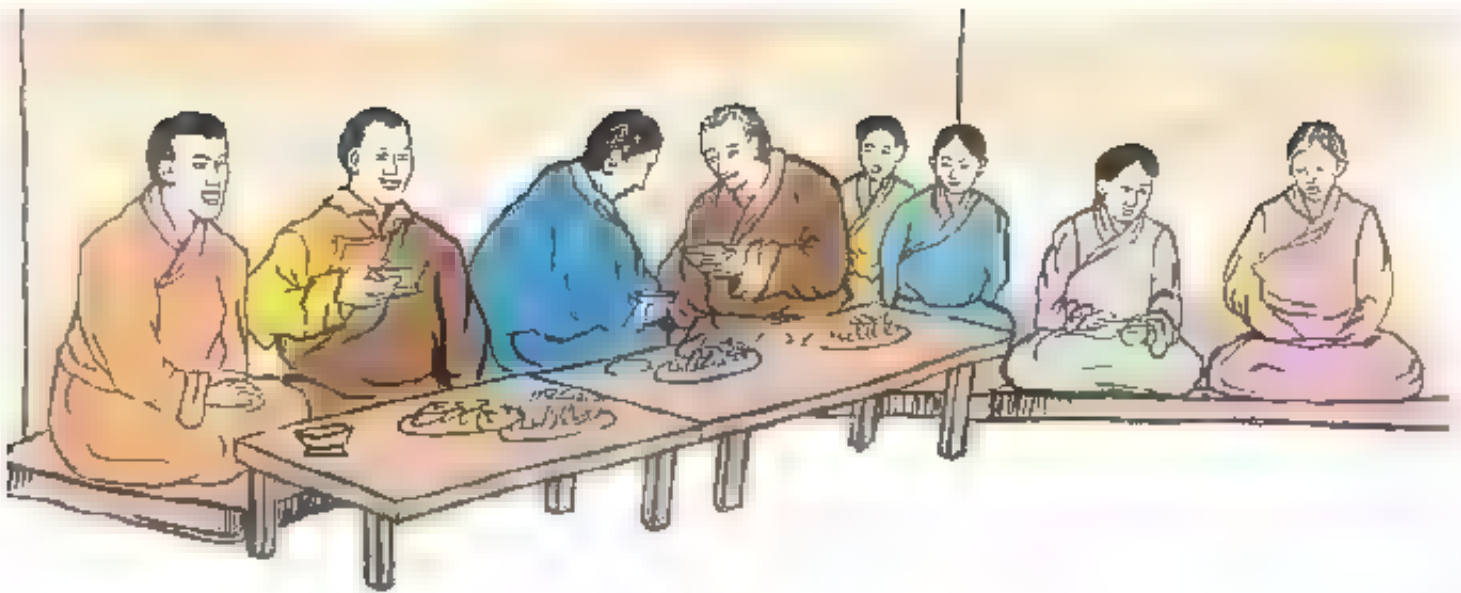
lu thala lamo thala len, mouths Dolma. 'What is it about?'

It's the song of Ling Gesar. He was a brave king of Tibet.

What did he do?' asks Dolma.

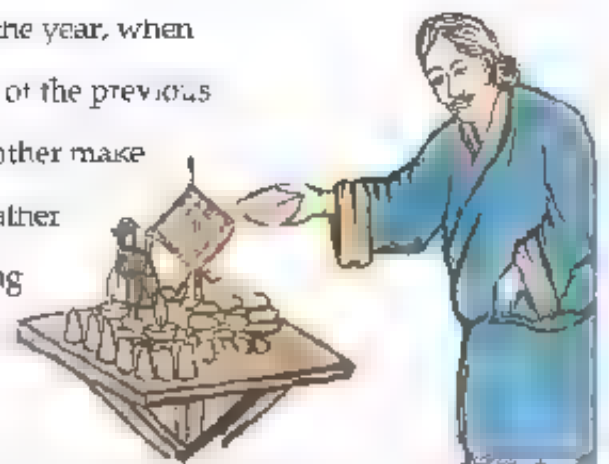
Many great things. He was born through the blessing of the gods and became king of the entire region by winning a difficult horse race. And when he was king, people were happy and there was peace in the land.' Dolma listens as Momo sings with such joy. After that day Dolma finds herself wandering towards Momo's room often. Momo sings and Dolma repeats after her.

January slowly gives way to February and it's time for the Tibetan New Year, Losar. It will be the first holiday for the sweater sellers in all these months. After Losar, the weather will grow warmer and the season will quickly draw to a close. After Losar, the sweater sellers can go back to the refugee camp. The chill of the months is gradually leaving and people have time to catch up with each other. Some mornings, the younger sweater sellers compete to see who can put up the stall first. The others cheer them and even the passers-by stop to participate in these mock contests.



Back at the lodge, Dolma asks Ama-la, 'When are we going home?' 'I am afraid this year we will be celebrating Losar here, Dolma replies Ama-la 'Pa-la being the President of the sweater sellers, it's not right for him to leave while the others are still here. Dolma looks dejected. She has tired of the city and the crowds and wants to go back to the quiet camp. As Losar approaches, Pa-la informs them that the celebrations will be at the Tibetan community hall for all the sweater sellers.

Two days before Losar is Cuthuk, the traditional end of the year, when Tibetans gather to ward off the misfortunes and troubles of the previous months before the new year begins. Dolma helps her mother make the special thukpa. The Tibetans living in the building gather in the tiny room where Dolma and her parents are staying. Ama-la has made the doll of dough and Pa-la leads





everyone in the ritual. Bowls of thukpa are passed around and everyone eats some leaving a little behind. This is poured over the doll. Pa-la passes little balls of *tsampa* around and Dolma rubs it on herself like he asks her to. She then pulls a thread from her dress and rolls it into the *tsampa*, which she then places near the doll. When everyone has finished, Pa-la carries the doll outside. At a three-road junction, he puts the doll down and they light some fireworks. They are now ready to ring in the new year.

The day before Losar, Dolma goes with Ama-la and a few others to clean the Community Hall. They spend the day cleaning and cooking special sweets like *knapsa* and Dolma's favourite, *bhungo amcho*, a sweet that's shaped like 'donkey's ears'.

Finally, it's the first day of the new year, Lama Losar. Dolma wakes up early and joins her family in prayers. The second day is the Gyampo Losar, usually spent in greeting elders and teachers. Dolma goes over to greet Momo with a *khata*. On the third day of Losar, Dolma gets ready to go to the community hall with her parents. She wears her new *chuba*. Ama-la has bought her matching bangles and ear rings and Dolma is thrilled. Her bangles make a soft tinkling sound and she loves it. In the hall, a group has gathered around in a circle to make *momo*. Some mince the meat while others roll out tiny circles of dough. Yet others shape the *momo* into little circular bags and ready them for steaming. Ama-la is helping someone serve *chang* while Pa-la is warming a large kettle of butter tea. Some of the Popo-las and Momo-las are playing a noisy dice game called *Sho* and others watch with much interest. Dolma is finally happy in the company of her people, family and friends. After lunch, she sits next to Pa-la nibbling at some dry cheese. The adults are talking about

this and that.

Someone says, 'Back in Tibet, this is the time when the *bhuchen* would come with their *thangkas* and narrate their stories.'

'Why Tibet?' Pa-la retorts. 'Even in the camps, we would hear songs and stories.'

'We can listen to the songs even here,' comes the response. It's Momo-la.

'Will you sing, Momo?' they ask her eagerly.

'Not me, but there is someone else here who loves to sing very much and who has been learning some of the songs,' she says, smiling at Dolma. 'But I don't know any songs of the *bhuchen*,' Dolma replies, going somewhat red in the face.

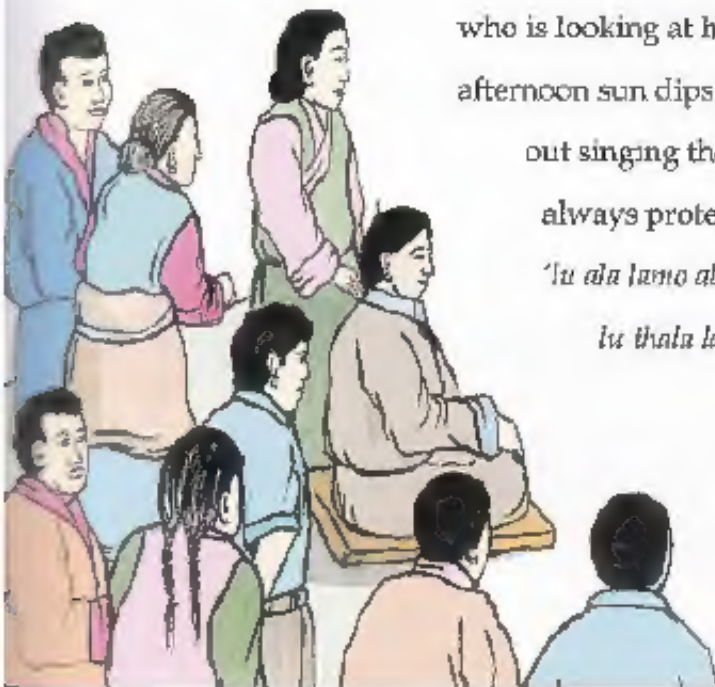
'The songs I've been teaching you...'



Dolma eyes light up in understanding. She turns towards Pa-la who is looking at her with deep pride and affection. And as the afternoon sun dips slowly into the sky, Dolma's clear voice rings out singing the tale of the warrior king of Tibet who will always protect his people.

'lu ala lamo ala len

lu thala lamo thala len...'



Glossary

Bhuchen or **Lama Mani** is the storyteller who goes from place to place singing and narrating legends and stories. He carries bundles of rolled-up **thangkas** to illustrate his stories.

Chang is a fermented drink made with barley, millet or rice.

Chuba is the traditional Tibetan dress worn by men and women.

Khata is the traditional Tibetan scarf, usually made of white silk, and containing the eight auspicious symbols. It is draped on important occasions, including the first day of school, while setting out on a journey, weddings and even funerals.

Lala is a form of address usually for an Indian merchant.

Men Tree-Khang is the Tibetan medical centre that follows the Tibetan system of medicine.

Milak is the Tibetan word for helper.

Momo is Tibetan for grandmother. It's also a form of address for older women, as Momo-la, which is more respectful.

Momo is an all-time favourite dish of steamed dumplings stuffed with minced meat or vegetables. Not to be confused with grandmother!

Popo is Tibetan for grandfather. It's also a form of address for older men, as Popo-la, which is more respectful.

Taski Detek is the traditional Tibetan greeting conveying good wishes.

Thangkas are Tibetan spiritual art drawn in a distinct style, depicting the teachers, spiritual guides and deities.

Thukpa is a popular dish of broth to which noodles, meat or vegetables are added. In Tibet, it is usually made in excess at dinner and had for breakfast also. Nothing like a hot bowl of nourishing soup on a cold morning!

Tsampa is a Tibetan staple food, made with roasted barley flour and mixed with salted butter tea. In the mountains, this simple dish is very useful for its high energy content.

Vapas jaa apna desh in Hindi means 'go back to your country'.



In 1959, when His Holiness the 14th Dalai Lama of Tibet sought asylum in India, tens of thousands of Tibetans followed him into exile. A year later, the State Government of Karnataka offered land for the Tibetan people and the first refugee camp in exile came up at Bylakuppe in Mysore district. Half a century later, the Tibetan community continues to live in exile.

Think Tibet was formed as a platform for people to work together to contribute to the community in exile. One avenue that was chosen is publishing of children's books that reflect a society in exile. As a tribute to the story tellers of Tibet whose tales regaled listeners young and old, the books are published under the imprint, Lama Mani Books.

The series, Meyul attempts to offer children a glimpse of life in an exile community. The word 'Meyul' does not find an exact translation in English but it best defines the place that is not one's home.

Think Tibet acknowledges the support extended by the chief representatives in Bangalore, Bylakuppe, and Mundgod, Dhargyal la, the President of the Sweater Seller Association in Bangalore, Kelsang la, the manager at the Gyenso Khang, and above all, the people who readily shared their stories in Mundgod, Bylakuppe, and Bangalore.

The two books in the Meyul series were made possible by a team of volunteers: Usha Mukunda, Lobsang Thardoe Martsa, Aravinda Anantharaman, Tenzin Choewang, Swathi Kantamani, and Tenzin Jangchup Lingpa

Aravinda Anantharaman was introduced to the Tibetan community in exile a decade ago, following an interview with a sweater seller. Based in Bangalore, she works with Hippocampus, an organisation that promotes reading among children.

Chime Tashi was born in exile and has grown up in the Tibetan Children's Village, Bylakuppe. The youngest of five children, it was his uncle, a monk and artist who inspired and trained him. Chime has studied the fine arts and has specialised in oil painting. He hopes to use art to reach out to people and create awareness about Tibet's history, culture and tradition.

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As winter sets in the Indian city, the Tibetans from the refugee camps make their way in bearing sweaters of all colours and designs. Dolma watches her father go year after year to Bangalore and misses him terribly. One winter, her mother takes her along to spend the holidays there. Dolma wants to help too and there's something she can do very well – sing!

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Other titles in the Meyul series:

Dorje's Holiday at the Gyenso Khang



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